

Europe's COVID-19 response must be delivered by society at large, not just governments

*So far, the focus has been on the EU's institutional responses to the COVID-19 crisis. Drawing on the [Visions of Europe project](#), **Roch Dunin-Wąsowicz** (LSE) explains why we need to pay attention to how civil society can survive the pandemic and help shape the response to it.*

In Slovakia, civil society organisations such as Mareena and the Human Rights League have been guiding migrants and refugees on the country's response to COVID-19 and on how to get by, but have also engaged them into community response by sewing facemasks for other vulnerable groups. German hospitals in Baden-Wuerttemberg have responded to the call of doctors Alsace's Mulhouse and Colmar that could not cope with the volume of patients and opened their doors to them. In Portugal, the Odemira municipality in Alentejo prepared special quarantine spaces for the region's foreign agricultural workers, regardless of legal status. Border communities across the Polish, German, and Czech borders campaigned ferociously against the national lockdown restrictions that deprived transnational workers of their livelihood.

In recent weeks, calls from society for different modalities of a universal income have gained traction, [some more radical](#), than [others](#). A consortium of formalised civil society actors, [led by Europe's trade unions](#), have called for more European solidarity, especially with front-line staff in the health service, and all those who are socially vulnerable or precariously employed. [While civil society groups have been mobilising around the world to deal with the effects of the crisis](#), it is in Europe where new types of social mobilisation were most able to act both within and across states. European citizens [have been showing cross-border solidarity in response to the pandemic when institutions were lacking](#), including local and [informal civic activism](#).

These and many other reactions to COVID-19 do not fit neatly into national institutional frames. They underscore how European integration has moved forward since its inception. They also illuminate the shortcomings of the current European construction. While the link between civil society and COVID-19 isn't, of course, unique to Europe, the data gathered through the Visions of Europe project point to the role both national and European civil society might play in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and how it can be harnessed to achieve effective recovery. History teaches us that civil society is part of the critical infrastructure of democracy, and thereby an indispensable tool to counter social ills, such as pandemics, in free societies. Nowhere has this been as clear as in Europe, within and across states.

While the COVID-19 pandemic is a humanitarian crisis, disproportionately hitting the elderly and the weakest in society, [its lasting effects on the economy, politics, and society might be equally dire](#). The question of civil society's response is particularly pertinent considering the accumulation of executive power by governments. Civil society will be of crucial importance to keep track on the restrictions put on civil liberties, to ensure they have been implemented within a liberal democratic framework and that authorities do not resort to (neo-)authoritarian measures. [And while COVID-19 has deprived civil society of the immediate sociability that catalyses action](#) – country-wide curbs on gatherings put in place throughout Europe since March 2020 have effectively paralysed social life in its physical form – online communication seems to have supplanted most traditional forms of sociality in a matter of days, [accelerating a familiar dynamic](#).

Many of the examples of new civic activity in Europe transgress national boundaries, but they also go beyond the traditional distinction between the state, the economy, and organised civil society. A great deal of the upsurge of social mobilisation in the face of COVID-19 doesn't fit these established categories, especially in a plural political and social space such as today's Europe.



Nationalisation of responses

The first and most striking development resulting from the COVID-19 emergency was the nationalisation of responses to its spread, both structural and ideational. On the structural level, this should come as no surprise. Apart from the work done by the European Medicines Agency, transnational health care provisions, [and some joint procurement of medical equipment, health policy remains the sole domain of EU Member States](#). Equally, the Schengen Zone – the temporary suspension of border check between countries – is an arrangement from which each state has the right to opt out. So it is unsurprising that, initially, the Member States took upon themselves to prioritise the availability of medical equipment for their own health services. In early March 2020, [France and Germany imposed limits on the sale of PPE to other countries](#). And while these moves have been dubbed as selfish, they highlight the long-standing but sometimes hidden or overlooked interests and tensions that exist within the EU.

[Equally, starting with Austria, Latvia, Poland, and Slovakia temporary reintroduction of border control within Schengen took around the same time](#), without much prior consultation on the EU level, which put a spanner in the workings of the Single Market. Poland's border restrictions continue to be a source of friction for the movement of goods, services, and people, especially with Czechia and Germany. [Conversely, Portugal enfranchised all of its irregular migrants, refugees and asylum seekers who had made themselves known to the authorities, by giving them access to social security during the pandemic](#). While commendable, this measure has been restricted to that country, leaving millions of migrants elsewhere in the EU in the lurch.

The second dimension of nationalisation was the [“rapid shrinking of horizons”](#) of the citizenry of Europe's states when faced with an unprecedented emergency. This nationalist reflex, however, has been largely constructed by politicians hoping to benefit from such framing in pursuit of narrow political goals. Yet [one cannot help but empathise with the plight of Italy](#) in the initial stages of the pandemic, when it got almost no support from other European states in time of dire need. This experience has been politicised and translated into record low satisfaction with European integration. In early March 2020, [88% of Italians thought Europe had failed to adequately help their country](#).

Nationalist narratives can find fertile ground in crisis-stricken Member States. And while some crisis mitigation measures can only be delivered by the state – or even on the local level – in other respects the response to COVID-19 necessitates multilateral, or in the case of Europe supranational, solutions. Yet dispute these measures, the nationalist narrative has been greatly reinforced by COVID-19. It also has been matched by a profoundly state-centric focus of expert analysis that places society – including civil society – as a mere recipient of measures put in by respective governments.

Europe's response

In an interesting turn of events, both long-term critics and supporters of [European supra-nationalism have castigated the EU for “not doing enough” or “miserably failing” in its response to the pandemic](#). On the one hand, this preoccupation with the EU shows how the European frame of reference is now embedded in the political imagination of the European demos. On the other, this kind of scapegoating of the EU for seeming failings, [in domains in which it has little or no jurisdiction, is nothing new](#). The European Commission has, in fact, after an initial period of wavering, undertaken most of the measures at its disposal: [it safeguarded Europe’s supply chains despite border closures; EU state aid and fiscal rules have been relaxed to allow for unique levels of spending by the Member States to prop up their economies; the Commission is raising €100bn to tackle upcoming joblessness](#); it has unrolled two coronavirus investment initiatives ([CRII & CRII+](#)). As of late May, [the Commission recommended an additional financial stimulus of €1.85 tn](#), including (but not limited to) €540bn in loans agreed by the eurozone in April, as well as €500bn of grants through the Next Generation EU initiative and another €250(BN?) in loans – delivered via the MFF.

Importantly, [the rhetoric of the EU’s seeming inaction was derived from a supremely institutional understanding of its functioning](#). Yet it has been civil society actors that have [urged more European coordination](#). A multitude of grassroots petitions and initiatives, coordinated by academics, industry bodies and trade unions, have all been calling for “Europe to do more together” from the very beginning of the pandemic.

The threat of emergency politics to democracy

Perhaps the most worrying development of the COVID-19 crisis is the rollback of substantive democracy, democratic backsliding, [or outright authoritarian measures that have become part of the emergency responses](#). In Britain, the government’s extraordinary curbs on civil liberties had initially no sunset clause, and subsequently, Parliament was disbanded for an early Easter recess preventing adequate scrutiny. In Poland, the ruling Law and Justice party unsuccessfully pressed for the 10 May presidential elections to take place – [hoping for an easy win in the initial phase of the crisis – despite a country-wide lockdown](#). Most infamously, [the Hungarian parliament has allowed Victor Orbán to rule by decree without any restrictions](#). He has already used these powers to enact laws that have nothing to do with the pandemic (gender identity) and to [encroach on local authorities’ jurisdiction](#) and arrest critics of the government for social media activity.

All these threats to democracy are putting a strain on civic activity, which finds itself in an unprecedented predicament, [both in terms of the types of threats it faces and the responses at its disposal](#). While both the European Commission and the European Parliament have [expressed concerns regarding these troubling developments](#), it is action that is needed. The threat posed by emergency politics to democracy can only be stemmed by supporting civil society. In some instances, civic mobilisation has an ally in local government, especially when activists from the third sector join public administration given the opportunity. For example, Budapest’s Mayor, Gergely Karácsony, has called for more EU funding to be directly channelled to towns and cities, [and NGOs to circumvent the politicised central government](#). This is especially pertinent, as some of the initial emergency CRII funding went directly to Member State governments. The current regime in Budapest actually received a disproportionately large share of it. Right now, the EU’s attention is preoccupied with crisis containment and recovery planning, [and its ability to police rule of law infringements has always been limited](#). [European solidarity cannot be implemented at the expense of democracy](#). If Member States are the culprits, [for example waging culture wars optimised for the pandemic to detract attention from their failings](#), the only viable solution is to strengthen grassroots politics and advocacy groups.

Mainstreaming of marginal ideas

One of the modest silver linings of the COVID-19 crisis is the restoration of fact-based policymaking. Scientists, predominately epidemiologists, but also sociologists and experts in public choice theory, are back in vogue – or so it seems. Civil society institutions have long been a repository of expert knowledge. In recent years many of them have been cast aside by populist politicians pandering to disenchanted publics. The COVID-19 crisis has the potential to restore their voices to the public debate. For example, [in Italy, the decline of support for populist parties has accelerated](#). Europe’s right-wing populists, in general, [have been on the decline throughout this emergency](#). In more general terms, the pandemic has accelerated the mainstreaming of once marginal ideas, many of which originated in civil society. Today, [a remarkable 84% of Europeans support an EU proposal for a mandatory minimum wage](#), a suggestion long on the agenda of workers’ rights advocates in Europe. The fact that radical anti-austerity measures are now advocated by newspapers like the FT, with many western governments heeding this advice, proves that once seemingly utopian ideas can become policy come the right circumstance.

Another example of this is the unprecedented fall in economic activity, which means that pollution has decreased rapidly, giving a glimpse of how to stem the climate emergency. [In the UK alone car traffic went down by almost three-quarters and reached levels last observed 65 years ago](#). This hiatus in the rapid development of the climate emergency has coincided with the mainstreaming of environmental sustainability, thanks to pressure exerted by experts and civil society actors in recent years. The adoption of CO2 emission reduction targets and the embracing of a “[European Green New Deal](#)” by the new European Commission wouldn't have been possible without grassroots activism. Recently, the Extinction Rebellion and Climate Strike actions have had a notable impact of the public consciousness with regard to the climate emergency, but this advocacy has been carried out by ecological experts and campaigners for decades now. The COVID-19 crisis brings Europe a step closer to realising what impact unscrupulous economic growth has had on the environment. Civil society will have a pivotal role in ensuring that post-COVID-19 recovery follows the path of green transition, while safeguarding the interests of groups that will bear the brunt of the economic and social turmoil.

Visions of Europe

These developments are consistent with our findings from the Visions of Europe project, which maps transnational civil society in Europe. Civil society institutions, movements, movement-parties and other non-institutional forms of social mobilisation often equate Europe with the notion of solidarity. The progressive groups we spoke to object to a transactional approach to European integration, which sees it merely as a resource, a playground for inter-governmental bargaining, and a scapegoat for failing national administrations. That approach could not withstand the economic and the existential shocks of 2008 and 2015, let alone the current one. Today, too, reverting to national solutions will only feed regressive political forces that had been capitalising on Europe-wide crises in the past.

In times of a global pandemic, political leaders need to heed civil society and see it, once again, as a source of values and policy solutions. Many of our interlocutors speak of finding “European solutions to European problems,” which is the language often used by Brussels. Yet what they are advocating for is bottom-up policy-making and implementation. Their aim is greater inclusion of various perspectives from society and the greatest degree of subsidiarity – decisions should be made and implemented as close to the citizen as possible. One needs to coordinate on a European level, but local actors should have maximum agency in adjusting policy and implementing change on the ground.

Europe's activist civil society may have embraced many of the achievements of the EU – such as a focus on equality before the law, and the European Social Model – they do however insist that there are grave lessons to be learned from the failures of the EU in recent years. Still, many had already seen the crisis of democracy as an opportunity to reignite political engagement before the pandemic erupted. Today, the conditions for civil society to push for solidarity below and across the nation-states seem to be ripe. If it is to be successful, Europe's response to COVID-19 has to be delivered by society at large.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the COVID-19 blog or LSE. Image by [Mircea Iancu](#) from [Pixabay](#).